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Harding Family Statement Regarding the Public Release of the Harding/Phillips Collection by The Library of Congress

I am Richard Harding Sr. grandnephew of Warren G. Harding and grandson of George T. Harding II (GTHII), the President's only brother who survived into adulthood. The President's brother had five children; the oldest was my father, George Tryon Harding III (GTHIII), who, with his siblings, was at the heart of the 1964 Harding Letters controversy, our topic today. Joining me are my two brothers, George and Warren, and other members of our families.

It is with some ambivalence, but with a sense of history, that we are present for this occasion. Fifty years ago my father, the oldest nephew of the President, along with his siblings, acquired the letters, had them sealed and, entrusted them to the Library of Congress. The current generation of Hardings has honored that trust. To our collective knowledge, no individual has had access to the original letters.

WGH's parents were Ohio frontier farmers as the country came out of the Civil War in 1865. His father's claim to fame was that while a soldier with the Army of the Potomac, he had gone to the White House and shook the hand of Abraham Lincoln. Fifty-five years later he would return as the father of the 29th president.

He and his wife, Phoebe Dickerson, farmed successfully but wanted more opportunity for their growing family, so both decided to attend the Cleveland Homeopathic Medical School. Warren, the oldest of their six surviving children, finished his schooling, taught school for a year then entered the newspaper business. He made a great success out of the Marion Star in prosperous Marion, Ohio. My grandfather, GTHII, followed in his parents' footsteps and graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1900.

My father and his siblings, Warren II, Ruth, Charles and Mary, had a special relationship with their "Uncle Warren." He filled a void left by the chronic, and at times incapacitating, cardiac illness of my grandfather. He taught his nephews and nieces to ride bikes, throw baseballs and swim in Whetstone Creek. He was present and supportive when things looked bleak for their father. In the President's will, he left \$10,000 to each niece and nephew. They used the gift for education, not a Model T Ford. Four of the five graduated from medical school and one from nursing school. This gift and its careful use enabled the continuation of the professional direction of our family.

Let me make one point clear. We, as a family, are not here to deny facts. What happened between two consenting adults over a 15-year period 100 years ago is not for our family to judge. Clearly, the negative ripple effect of their relationship has been keenly felt and processed along with the many positive attributes of our ancestor.

Why did my father seal the letters for 50 years? With only an educated guess, I surmise that my father (the oldest living Harding at the time) and his siblings did not carefully study the letters. It is likely they felt they were protecting their beloved uncle and the close family members who knew him.

I think it goes without saying that the Harding family has always considered the letters private documents. With our long tradition of medical practice and public service, we firmly believe that private matters, even for the rich and famous, should remain private. However, as a person also keenly interested in history, I have some understanding of the uniqueness of high level governmental leaders' correspondence and its possible significance to historical scholars, especially when the correspondence includes discussion with a close confidant of the issues of the day and the important decisions that resulted.

In 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. With the help of his brother, the attorney general, the Kennedy papers were collected, retained, sealed and placed in the Kennedy Library for a 50-year period. Much of that material remains sealed after 50 years have passed. My father used this precedent in 1964 but instead chose the Library of Congress, where he felt presidential materials could best be housed and protected. My father was a devout, no-nonsense person. He understood that a president's personal letters are different than those of the regular citizen. He had hoped that in the calm, cool political climate of 2014, it might be possible to have a careful review of the letters by historical scholars. He, in 1964, could not have imagined the Internet. He would not have believed that in 2014, any person in the world would be able to read the letters at their leisure in their home or office. Our frustration now is that most articles and inquiries so far have been focused on titillating phrases rather than meaningful historical content.

So, we are proudly here. This symposium has been mostly focused on a small selective part of Warren Harding's life. I am appreciative of the Library's efforts to research some of the issues today. However, we would prefer to be talking about President Harding's accomplishments: the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference, the fact that Harding was an early leader in civil rights, that he proposed anti-lynching laws, and reestablished the primacy of the First Amendment after WWI, created the Budget Bureau and then balanced the budget, lowered the income tax rates and protected natural resources in Alaska and, made the hard choices that all presidents must. Instead, we are talking about a good man's mistakes, which seem all too common in our 20th Century political leaders. We, as a family, feel we did the right thing having fulfilled the trust set up 50 years ago. History will tell us if we were wise to do so.

Now, I challenge you in the audience and likeminded writers and historians to do your professional duty. A collection of private letters from a key senator and future President to his confidant, during a critical period in American history, does not come along often. It is our hope and your responsibility to not be distracted by the sexually explicit prose that fills parts of these letters but, instead, to use all the information in them to reassess the measure of the man.

WGH doesn't need protection.

He needs honest, hardworking and fair historians to tell the story as they see it.

*Prepared for July 22, 2014 discussion at the
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